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INSTITUTIONAL PATERNALISM IN HIGH SCHOOL.

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TO DETERMINE WHETHER STUDENTS ARE ALIENATED FROM OR INVOLVED IN THEIR SCHOOL WORK 49 INTERVIEWS AND 2,329 QUESTIONNAIRES WERE SECURED FROM STUDENTS FROM THREE HIGH SCHOOLS IN WHICH QUALITY OF FACILITIES, CURRICULUM, STUDENT BACKGROUND, AND STAFF WERE OPTIMAL, THUS ALLOWING CONCENTRATION ON THE ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL. IT WAS FOUND THAT, IN CONTRAST TO THE ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY THAT FUNCTIONARIES IN A BUREAUCRACY (STUDENTS IN A SCHOOL) TYPICALLY BECOME "ALIENATED" FROM THEIR WORK, THESE SUPERIOR STUDENTS IN SUPERIOR SCHOOLS WERE UNEQUIVOCALLY INVOLVED. THEY THOUGHT HIGHLY OF THEIR SCHOOLS AND LIKED THEIR TEACHERS. ONLY 2 PERCENT (55 STUDENTS) EXPRESSED DISSATISFACTION. HOWEVER, IT WAS FURTHER FOUND THAT STUDENTS ARE INVOLVED IN THE WRONG ASPECTS OF SCHOOL LIFE (THAT IS, GETTING GOOD GRADES) INSTEAD OF HAVING MEANINGFUL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND THAT THEY LOOK ON HIGH SCHOOL AS A MEANS TO AN END (THAT IS COLLEGE OR A GOOD JOB). AN EXPLANATION OF THE STUDENTS NONALIENATION, DESPITE THE TRIVIALITY OF THEIR WORK AND THE POWERLESSNESS OF THEIR ROLE, IS THAT THEY BELIEVE THE WORK IS BENEFITING THEM BECAUSE THEY PERCEIVE THE SCHOOL STAFF AS BENEVOLENT AND COMPETENT FIGURES WHO WOULD DO NOTHING TO HARM THEM. THIS PAPER WAS PREPARED FOR PRESENTATION AT THE MEETING OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (SAN FRANCISCO, 1967). (AW)

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INSTITUTIONAL PATERNALISM IN HIGH SCHOOL*

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To say that American education is bureaucratized education is to state the obvious, but it is also to suggest a very interesting theoretical issue: On the one hand much of the literature about formal organizations indicates that functionaries typically become "alienated" from their work, while, on the other hand, our pedagogical theory insists that true education occurs only when students are somehow "involved" in their curricular experiences.[1] Since alienation and involvement may be thought of as opposites, and since students may be seen as functionaries, it would appear that either our organizational theory is wrong, our educational theory is wrong, both are wrong, or perhaps we are not truly educating our children.

There is a good deal of polemic and speculation about this matter, but there is a real dearth of empirical research. In early 1965, therefore, we[2] initiated an exploratory study to

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gather some much-needed factual information about how this educational version of the organization-individual encounter was actually experienced by students. The present paper is a first report of some of our findings.[3]

It is based primarily on 2,329 questionnaires returned by the entire student bodies of two leading high schools in the Boston area, one ("West High") a public school, the other ("Parochial High") a Roman Catholic school. These data were supplemented by verbatim transcripts of interviews with forty-six students at "East High", another leading public school.[4] Selecting only superior schools made optimum such otherwise influential factors as quality of staff, administration, facilities, and student background, thus allowing us to concentrate on the purely organizational aspects of the schools. The interview topics and questionnaire items were selected to elicit comment and attitudes about such things as the authority structure of the school, the division of labor, rules and norms, etc. Many of these items were taken directly from published instruments purporting to measure alienation, anomie, and related orientations; others were based on discussions in the literature, and a few were invented ad hoc.[5]

Are Students Alienated?

The modern high school, according to the literature, would seem to be an organization which would alienate its members: Students are almost entirely without power, they are segregated from the larger community, their work is patently unreal, and their curriculum is both internally fragmented and in large degree externally irrelevant.[6] But if we take morale or loyalty as indicators of alienation, and they are presumably among the best, then our students certainly cannot be said to be alienated: Large majorities agree that "Compared to other schools, this school provides a first-rate education" (55 out of 2,329 disagreed), and all but one hundred agreed that "I am proud to be a student here" (another 144 had no feeling about this).

An "aggrandizement effect"[7] is doubtless operative here, but it apparently only magnifies the genuine satisfaction felt by these students. When, for example, we asked about specifics, our respondents also expressed satisfaction with the teachers, the curriculum, the marking system, and indeed every organizational feature of the school that was mentioned. In sum, and to make a long story short, the great majority of our students simply did not exhibit the usual symptoms of alienation, so these highly bureaucratized schools cannot be said to alienate their student bodies.

On the other hand, however, we quickly discovered that the students, though involved, were involved <u>in the wrong things</u>:

> (Have your courses been helpful?) Just to get into college. I need them to get into college. I do like History, though, and English.
>
> My main purpose is to get the diploma. College is a help, but if you don't get that diploma, well, that's pretty bad. It's getting pretty tough to get a good job, you know. The main purpose for me and to other students who are not going on to further education is to get that diploma.
>
> I think in high school the goal you are trying to reach is college, and in college the goal you are trying to reach is knowledge and social maturity as well as intellectual maturity.

There are some things of intrinsic worth in high school, but the experience is generally viewed as an instrumental one, as a means to college admission or to a better job. Among the most unequivocal responses to our questionnaire was a 91 percent agreement with the statement: "What we do in high school is essentially preparation for what will come later; the pay-off will be in college or on the job."

And our respondents were utterly realistic about what was required: A good Record.

> Well, in East High you work for good grades so you can go to college. It's just--you know--everybody is obsessed with the fact, and I know even I.
>
> Your parents don't know what you know, and people don't know what you know, and the colleges don't know what you know, so if you're going to try for

> anything you're going for the grade. I mean the payoff. I mean, you may have the knowledge, but it's not going to do you any good. If you want to go someplace and you want to go to college or anyplace, you have to have the grades, anyway at least to graduate from high school.
>
> In high school kids go out for clubs and athletics and things of that nature to build up their all-aroundness so that they can get into college. (Extra-curricular activities help you get into college?) Yes, they are very important. Colleges like students of varied interests. (What if you just like to sit and think?) Well, I suppose you could put this down on your application.
>
> I think if you're popular in this school you've got half the battle licked, because so many kids go home and, I think, they worry just because they're not known, and that eats away at them so much that their grades go down . . .

Everything, it would seem, from class work to extra-curricular activities to social life, comes to be related to the maximization of the record, to the building of a favorable "paper shadow" in the files of the front office.[8] Looking Good thus comes to assume first priority, and, though only about 40 percent of our students would cheat to avoid flunking, most would give the teacher a wrong answer if the teacher thought it was the right one.[9] Over-emphasis on this sort of success naturally breeds concentration on what Argyris calls the "skin-surface" performance aspects of work,[10] and most of our students agree that "Personality, pull, and bluff get students through many courses," that performance is more important than character, and that ability to express

oneself is more important than knowledge.

Our students are involved, then, but they are clearly involved in the task of getting through school, or maximizing the Record, not in the experiences which educators postulate as the essence of curriculum. The resulting student attitudes may be disturbing to the educator, but they should come as no surprise to the sociologist: given the prime fact of task-orientation, they could be predicted from the literature of industrial sociology.

But there is still a problem here, for organizational theory indicates that trivial work alienates, and that a condition of powerlessness alienates. Our students recognize that "making out" in high school is not true education, but they are also proud of making out; they take a sort of pride in workmanship in accumulating good marks and looking good. Our students also recognize their virtual powerlessness, but this too does not lead to feelings of alienation.

If students can most profitably be viewed as task-oriented workers, and this seems to be the case, how is involvement in trivial work possible? And how does near-total powerlessness fail to result in alienation? These are the questions to be discussed in the remainder of this paper. It will be our general contention that a special set of attitudes, which we call "the myth of institutional paternalism", intervenes between the

perceived situation and the student's reaction to it, converting the situation from one conducive to alienation into one characterized by a high level of involvement.

Meaning in School

One of the most popular sociological explanations for poor performance in school argues that the academic curriculum is meaningless to students who do not expect to go to college.[11] This is a plausible hypothesis, but our research indicates that it needs much more consideration.

First, as we have seen, there is little or no intrinsic motivation exhibited by students in our elite high schools: Grades, not substantive achievement, are the important thing. Presumably these students would be just as workmanlike in the performance of their educational tasks regardless of the particular courses they took, so, it is not that the academic curriculum is so much more relevant for these students, it is just that the marks are more important.

In point of fact, and this is our second observation, student aims or goals are very poorly defined for the students themselves:

> You know, ever since I came up here they've been testing me and one of the tests was in mathematics and another in business stuff. I guess business is just what I'm headed for.

> I didn't know what I wanted to do until maybe a couple of weeks ago, and I don't think any of the other kids do either (laughs); and, I don't know if that's what I'll be, so these are just general courses that you've got to take to fill the quota.

Most of our respondents were "certain" that they were going to college, but just what going to college means is another question. Of course the students recognized that going to college was the best way to become successful, but it is also interesting to note that college is an alternative to making the sort of commitment that would give real meaning to current class work:

> I'd rather go to college than work. Like going to college for four years I can also gain learning that will help me and also postpone my having to go to work.

> I'm not sure what I'm going to do and I don't want to limit myself. I don't want to sit back and say I'm going into business. I'm afraid I wouldn't be happy at this point if I decided to go into a four year business school like (School). I'd come out and, O.K., I could go into business; but if I said I wanted to do anything else, I wouldn't be able to. I want to go to a liberal arts school.

This hesitancy about making a commitment ran through all of our interviews, and it appears in our questionnaire returns as a willingness to let others, i.e., the school staff, make the major decisions for the student.[12]

The sheer fact that students are young means that they are not sure of their "real" desires, and our respondents readily admitted their innocence. It would in fact be unrealistic to

expect them to have clear-cut notions about adult roles; they have never been adults.

In this situation, students behave quite rationally, i.e., they pursue a policy of non-commitment, including delaying commitment as long as possible. Commitment means abandoning alternatives, and premature commitment can mean abandoning opportunities which might later prove more desirable.[13] Non-commitment also means not possessing the criteria to assess the meaning of current experiences.

High school work is thus viewed as a generalized preparation, a "making ready" (praeparare) for future commitments. Thus, paradoxically, the very absence of specific purpose allows the student to impute a sort of generalized worth, or "preparation value", to all of his school activities. Conversely, to know one's specific goal in life might reveal many of these activities to be irrelevant.

To elaborate on the articulation hypothesis, then, we might first suggest that it is the relevance of marks, not the academic nature of the typical high school curriculum, that makes college-bound students work harder than others. Second we would suggest that plans for further education do not necessarily reveal the long-range significance of high school studies; rather such plans allow the student to avoid or postpone the entire issue of rele-

vance, and thus allow him to impute a vague preparation-value to his current activities. Students not destined for college and the white-collar world may accurately perceive the lack of articulation between school work and adult role, but this need not mean that college-bound students perceive a congruence; they do see the relevance of good marks, though, and that is sufficient to account for their dedication to the task of accumulating them.

Powerlessness and Paternalism

The most common cause of (or synonym for) alienation mentioned in the research literature is powerlessness, and high school students are among the most powerless members of our society. By and large, though, our respondents indicated that they had <u>enough</u> power, and our interviews indicate why:

> I think the student has freedom to take more or less what he wants. (This is wrong) because a kid can take very easy courses the rest of the year and maybe, maybe he's got the potential to do something with himself instead of being lazy. I don't know how they could fix it or prearrange it, but I think the student is given too much freedom to choose what he wants.
>
> (Do you think students have enough say about who runs this place and the policy of the school?) Yes, I think if it wasn't run by the administrative part of the school system then things would get out of hand. I think there has to be somebody to lay down the law and say it's going to be this way. ...I don't think students at this age know everything, and I think they need somebody to guide them and tell them what's right. They might

> think something is right now, but twenty years from now it might not be in their opinion.

These students do not want power, in part because, as implied in the previous section, they would not know what to do with it even if they had it. Their educations are too important to be left in inexperienced hands, and they are acutely conscious of their own inexperience.

Satisfaction with powerlessness, though, must reflect satisfaction with the way power is wielded by those who do possess it, and indeed our students thought highly of their superiors, especially their teachers.[14] They liked their teachers because they thought them competent, but what teachers are competent at is not entirely clear. It seems that teachers make school work more pleasant, by being entertaining, informed, clear, in control of the classroom, enthusiastic about the subject, and fair. In addition, teachers are apparently expected to make the student want to do the work; teachers motivate. In any event, the teacher is seen as the major determiner of the educational process, he rather literally "makes" education happen.

The student, on the other hand, is relatively passive: he learns, to be sure, but it is the teacher who causes the learning to occur. Accordingly, teachers are often evaluated by the critical standards of an audience, as actors are, with performance being judged by the relatively non-volitional responses of the

student-critics. A better analogy would be the doctor-patient relationship: The patient is expected to follow orders, and to that extent he participates in his own cure, but the prime responsibility for a successful outcome rests with the physician. It is the student's job to do what the teacher tells him to do; it is the teacher's job to know what to tell the student to do, and it is therefore the teacher's responsibility to know <u>why</u> the student should do it.

As in the doctor-patient relationship, so in the teacher-pupil one, confidence in the professional is a necessary ingredient. This is not only confidence in technical ability, it also includes the belief that the professional is working for the client's benefit. From the student's point of view, then, the teacher is both competent and benevolent, and the relationship is a professional one, or, as we have phrased it, (in order to avoid unnecessary implications) a <u>paternalistic</u> one.

But competence and benevolence are not personal qualities of teachers, they are attributes of the teaching role. Thus students do not express gratitude for adequate teaching services, though they may be warm in their critical applause for an exceptional performance, and they tend to be morally indignant about uninspiring teaching: teachers are <u>supposed</u> to be capable and concerned, that is the nature of their job. We have therefore

referred to this set of attitudes as faith in "institutional" paternalism.

It should be emphasized that these are student beliefs, not necessarily school policy or actuality; but if students define the situation to be paternalistic, then for them it is. So institutional paternalism may be thought of as a "useful myth", a myth because its reality-content has little to do with its efficacy, and useful because it intervenes between the potentially alienating conditions of student powerlessness and curricular meaninglessness to produce a <u>faith</u> that one is in good hands and that there is meaning in what one does. Indeed, belief in institutional paternalism may appear precisely because there is a <u>need</u> for a faith of this sort, a need for some sort of redefinition of what might otherwise be an intolerable situation.[15]

<u>Conclusions</u>

We began this study with a question about the student's reaction to his bureaucratic school, and we concluded by noting how the "myth of institutional paternalism" allows him to become involved in work which would otherwise be alienating. In the process we had occasion to amend some educational sociology, e.g., the "articulation hypothesis" was seen to be incomplete, and we raised questions about current formulations of the concept of

alienation, e.g., it is obvious that powerlessness *per se* does not cause alienation, nor can it be equated with it.

But there is a more important question that has not been dealt with here, a question which probably cannot even be answered yet, but one whose eventual answer will determine the larger significance of what we have discussed: Although the myth of institutional paternalism allows students to become involved in their work, to make better marks, and to succeed in school, *is this what we want*? If involvement in work shapes one's character, as it is often said to do, and if the work of the student is as trivial as the task-performance model suggests, then might we not be guilty of shaping trivial personalities in our schools?

If that is the case, and it may or may not be, then alienation is vastly preferable to involvement, for alienation under these conditions is a healthy response which insulates the personality against the effects of an unhealthy situation. The myth of institutional paternalism, that is to say, may not be so useful after all.

Footnotes

1. Alienation as a researchable variable was introduced by Karl Marx, but it has only been in the last decade or so that much empirical work with it has been done. A summary of scales is being prepared by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, but in the meantime incomplete discussions may be found in Robert Blauner, Alienation and Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), Eric and Mary Josephson (eds.), Man Alone (New York: Dell, 1962), and, from the Marxist camp, Herbert Aptheker (ed.), Marxism and Alienation (New York: Humanities Press, 1964). Enlightened educational theory since at least the time of Rousseau's Emile has emphasized the need to involve the child, and John Dewey's approach in this century has become incorporated in most texts on teaching. For Dewey's position, see especially his Experience and Education (New York: Collier Books, 1963), first published in 1938. Unfortunately, Dewey never seemed to appreciate the power of formal organization to convert educational resources into bureaucratic ones, though there are some rueful asides in this late book, and he never proposed an organizational alternative to the factory-model school.

2. The "we" used in this paper is not editorial; my colleagues on this study, Robert G. Williams, Richard A. Minisce, and Delene D. Rhea, made substantial contributions to all phases of the work.

3. The project report was: Buford Rhea, Measures of Child Involvement and Alienation from the School Program, Final Report of Cooperative Research Project No. S-383 (Washington: Office of Education, Department of Health Education, and Welfare, 1966), 122 pp., multilithed.

4. East and West Highs are almost identical, so interview materials from the former can be applied with some assurance to the latter. West and Parochial Highs differed primarily in the reactions of their students to authority, though the differences were not great.

5. The most useful sources were: Blauner, op. cit.; Arthur Stinchcombe, Rebellion in a High School (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964); Gwynn Nettler, "A Measure of Alienation" American Sociological Review 22 (December, 1957), pp. 670-77; Jan Hajda, "Alienation and Integration of Student Intellectuals," American Sociological Review 26 (October, 1961), pp. 750-77; John P. Clark, "Measuring Alienation Within a Social System," American Sociological Review 24 (December, 1959), pp. 849-52; Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation," American Sociological Review 24 (December, 1959); Dwight G. Dean, "Alienation: Its Meaning and Measurement," American Sociological Review 26 (October, 1961), pp. 753-58; Arthur N. Turner and Paul R. Lawrence, Industrial Jobs and the Worker (Boston: Division of Research, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, 1965); Rose Laub Coser, "Alienation and the Social Structure," The Hospital in Modern Society, ed. Eliot Freidson (New York: Free Press, 1963), pp. 231-65; Leonard I. Pearlin, "Alienation from Work: A Study of Nursing Personnel," American Sociological Review 27 (June, 1962), pp. 314-26; Arthur Neal and Salomon Rettig, "Dimensions of Alienation among Manual and Non-Manual Workers," American Sociological Review 28 (August, 1963), pp. 599-608; Leonard I. Pearlin and Morris Rosenberg, "Nurse-Patient Social Distance and the Structural Context of a Mental Hospital," American Sociological Review 27 (February, 1962); David Mallery, High School Students Speak Out (N.Y.: Harper, 1962); Dwight D. Dean, "Alienation and Political Apathy," Social Forces 38 (March, 1960), pp. 185-89; and Russell Middleton, "Alienation, Race, and Education," American Sociological Review 28 (December, 1963), pp. 973-77.

6. Cf. Seeman, op. cit. Students, though, see things differently, and that is the main point of the present article. Powerlessness, as will be discussed below, is recognized, but is thought to be appropriate; segregation from the larger community is also recognized, but by being in school students feel attached to the larger community, while isolation is said to accompany dropping out. Meaning, on the other hand, is imputed to the situation by the students, again a matter to be discussed below, and fragmentation and lack of continuity is only dimly perceived and scarcely felt. Substantial majorities of our students, for example, agreed with our two questionnaire items about curricular organization: "The sequence of courses is well organized here; what is learned at one time is followed

up in later courses," and "The content of courses is well organized here; material in one course is related to material in others, but there is no unnecessary repitition." Students in interview did not deny the reality of discontinuity, they were simply not bothered by it: "We put things together in our heads," one said. Compare Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education (N.Y.: Mentor Books, 1949), pp. 18-19.

7. ". . an upward distortion of an organization's prestige by its own members." Theodore Caplow, Principles of Organization (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), p. 213.

8. On paper shadows, see Erving Goffman, Asylums (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1961), p. 75. The paper image is so important because it is an "actionable entity" (loc. cit.), and the actions taken on the basis of it, as our students fully recognized, can have a major effect on one's life chances.

9. Parochial High differs somewhat from West High on this, for although Parochial High students begin as freshmen by generally denying that they would cheat or give a hypocritical Right Answer, by the time they are seniors a majority would do both. Proportions saying that they would rather cheat than flunk, for instance, are: Freshmen (33.7 percent), Sophomores (34.7), Juniors (48.0), Seniors (59.2). West High responses do not change appreciably over time, though interview respondents noted that they had become "savvy" in junior high, i.e., earlier than the relatively unsophisticated Catholic students. Incidentally, these figures should not be interpreted, necessarily, as due to moral decay resulting from attendance at Parochial High; rather they seem to measure the greater pressure to succeed found at this school. Parochial High is a private school, and expulsions and withdrawals are not uncommon. As one of the elite schools of the Catholic educational system in Boston, parental pressures are also apparently enormous, and all of these students are slated to go on to college. To fail a course here, then, carries with it sanctions not found in so extreme a form in public schools.

10. Chris Argyris, Personality and Organization (N.Y.: Harper, 1957), pp. 59-60, et passim.

11. For a good discussion of this "articulation hypothesis" see Stinchcombe, op. cit.

12. For example, 61 percent of our students disagree with the statement: "Students have too little responsibility for their own education here," with another 10 percent having no opinion, while 66 percent agree that: "Students should be sufficiently supervised so that their mistakes have no serious consequences." Students in fact have very little authority, but that is apparently not "too little".

13. Cf. Howard S. Becker, "Notes on the Concept of Commitment," American Journal of Sociology 66 (July, 1960), pp. 32-40.

14. Students were asked to "grade" (A,B,C,D,F) various aspects of the school. Teachers wound up second--and a close second--to peers as a source of satisfaction.

15. Our evidence is only impressionistic on this point, but many interview respondents described how they "willed" a good opinion of their teachers. To think poorly of a teacher means to do poorly in the course, so in order to make a good mark (and to enjoy, or at least make tolerable, the work) these students go into new classes with a determination to like them, i.e., to think the teacher able and the subject somehow worthy of serious effort. Need thus seems to precede experience, and it is not at all hard to see why students need to believe in institutional paternalism: to be at the mercy of unconcerned incompetents, in school or in surgery or wherever, is hardly a pleasant prospect, and to be forced to spend the first part of one's life doing pointless exercises would be no better. Unable to withdraw or rebel (this route leads to failure), these ambitious students seem eager to detect, and perhaps even to fantasy, competence and concern among the staff. Whether faith in institutional paternalism stems from the genuine ability of the personnel of these privileged schools, or from the ambition and single-mindedness of these middle-class students, or from some combination of the two, is thus an open question.